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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the history, the concept, the process, and several models of institutional effectiveness, focusing particularly on those using the Criteria for Accreditation of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). It defines institutional effectiveness as an ongoing process that includes strategic planning, mission, goals, objectives, assessment, evaluation, and revision, with a framework that rests on clearly defined purpose, educational goals consistent with the institution's purpose, its development and implementation of procedures for evaluating these goals, and its use of the evaluation to improve educational goals. The paper reviews various models of the strategic planning process, assessment, and evaluation, including program review and student outcomes. Also discussed is a survey of Texas higher education conducted in spring 1997 to gather information on the status of the institutional effectiveness process at the various institutions. Most of the responding institutions indicated adoption of at least some of the SACS guidelines. The study also found increasing progress in the establishment of institutional research offices. (Contains 24 references.) (CH)

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Institutional Effectiveness: Practice or Theory

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Assistant Dean of Institutional Effectiveness

Presented:

Association for Institutional Research

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Dolores Vura
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Introduction

Did Johnny and Sally get the college education they paid for and are they qualified to get a job? Did the university provide a value added learning equal to the tuition that their parents paid? These and many other questions are being asked of higher education, not only by students and parents, but also by accrediting agencies, state legislatures, state coordinating boards and other state agencies whose job it is to protect the interests of the state's taxpayers. Institutions have been required to respond to public pressure for accountability and to improve their processes to meet the educational needs of their constituents (Angle, 1990). "Institutions must reexamine and communicate the important educational values that define their existence and implement strategies to assess student and institutional performance with respect to those values. Assessment must be based on that which is truly important" (Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996:9).

El-Khawas and Rossman (1987:4-5) report essentially three primary reasons for the existence of assessment: political, economic, and educational. Political forces perceived weaknesses in the educational system and have begun to question whether the enormous expenditures on education are justified. In the past the value of higher education was not questioned even in poor economic times, but today, dwindling state budgets combined with increased demands for improved prisons, mental health services, medicaid and other state services have required state officials to shift funds to these other areas. State legislatures and the public at large began to question the value of what was being done in higher education. The mood seemed to be that higher education must prove that their efforts were producing effective results in the most economical way. Thus, the need for assessment has moved to the forefront as an issue in higher education.

A shift to a global economy required that the United States develop a well-trained workforce to compete in a world marketplace. A 1990 study by the Education Commission of the States revealed that 40 states had actively promoted assessment. The "New Accountability" movement migrated into higher education in the 1990's brought on by mandated public accountability. Assessment is needed to ensure a well-trained workforce to support regional, state, and local economies (El-Khawas & Rossman, 1987). With a global economy other nations threaten our ability to remain a world power and keep our country economically viable. Education is the means to convert talents into economically productive work.

A third reason for assessment comes from several reports about assessment written by those within the higher education field. The two most influential reports about assessment are Involvement in Learning (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, National Institute of Education, 1984) and Integrity in the College Curriculum (Association for American Colleges, 1985). The National Institute of Education (NIE) report, influenced by the ideas of Alexander Astin, expressed a need for higher education to institute systematic processes to assess knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capacities from academic and co-curricular processes. Students benefit from involvement in the campus environment was heavily emphasized in the NIE report. The Association for American Colleges (AAC) report was more blunt in its call for improvement, referring to the absence of institutional accountability as "one of the most remarkable and scandalous aspects" of higher education (p. 33). Overall, these reports question the quality of education and call for an assessment of student progress.

"If institutional effectiveness is to be achieved, there must be some sense of what it is and what it would look like" (Kreider, 1990:iv). If an institution is going to assess itself, it must make a systematic evaluation of its performance in relation to its stated mission. Program review is only one component of institutional effectiveness.

Institutional Effectiveness Model

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) concept of institutional effectiveness is at the heart of the commission's philosophy of accreditation and is central to institutional processes and operations. It pervades the Criteria for Accreditation. This concept presumes that all the member institutions are engaged in an ongoing quest for quality and each can demonstrate how well it fulfills its intended purpose (Criteria for Accreditation, 1996). Major emphasis, in the accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation approval processes, is given to the quality and effectiveness of the education provided by the institution. Each institution is required to document its quality and effectiveness by employing a comprehensive system of planning and evaluation in all aspects of the institution.

The institution must provide evidence that institutional effectiveness processes have been implemented not only in the educational programs, but also in administrative and educational support services. Although the commission does not advocate one particular interpretation of these concepts, an institutional effectiveness process must include all of the following:

strategic planning; mission; goals; objectives; assessment, evaluation, and revision (Criteria for Accreditation, 1996). Figure 1.1 describes how this process must be ongoing.

Figure 1

The SACS Institutional Effectiveness Model

The SACS model of institutional effectiveness is a continuous process moving from planning, to assessment and evaluation, and finally to use of the results. This continuous improvement process assures the university that its established goals will be achieved.

SACS requires that each institution develop an institutional effectiveness process that is appropriate to its own purpose by establishing a purpose statement and using this statement as the foundation for its planning and research. In addition, SACS stipulates that the institution utilize a variety of assessment methods to demonstrate how the results of its planning and evaluation processes are being used for the improvement of both educational programs and support activities. Ultimately, educational quality will be judged by how well the institution meets its established purpose and goals (Criteria for Accreditation, 1996).

Successful program assessment must incorporate several principals which are all equally important. In the planning and evaluation processes, it is important to involve the people who will be affected by and/or responsible for the processes. For example, with regard to

assessment of the curriculum and instruction, faculty may not perform the assessment, but they must be involved in developing the means of assessment and otherwise at least endorse the process. Procedures must be implemented to define the types of measures to be collected, processes required to collect the data and techniques needed to evaluate the results (Resource Manual on Institutional Effectiveness, 1989:17).

Another important consideration is the determination of appropriate levels of analysis. The organization must set goals and assess the results at all levels. There are no absolute standards or benchmarks for the outcomes, therefore, comparative rates within the organization are critically important. The institution must provide incentives to departments and faculty, both to take the assessment seriously, and to use assessment results to improve programs and services (Resource Manual on Institutional Effectiveness, 1989:17).

Institutional Effectiveness Framework

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) defines the framework for a strong institutional effectiveness process by stating that institutions must:

1) establish a clearly defined purpose appropriate to collegiate education;
2) formulate educational goals consistent with the institution's purpose;
3) develop and implement procedures to evaluate the extent to which these educational goals are being achieved; and
4) use the results of these evaluations to improve educational goals are being achieved (Criteria for Accreditation, 1996).

Strategic Planning

The planning process to develop an effective institutional effectiveness process requires the involvement of the leadership of the institution and all stakeholders. But does the leadership always provide the driving force? In a study of Level I institutions of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, it was found that institutional leaders had not assumed a major role at many institutions in the planning and evaluation process and, therefore, the process was not always taken seriously and the results not used effectively (Steed, 1991).

Another study attempted to compare the North Carolina model of institutional effectiveness to the needs of the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges (AABC). This study attempted to

determine if the institutional effectiveness model used by North Carolina colleges and universities was appropriate for the AABC. Wilburn (1995) found that the framework or process for assessing quality in higher education is adaptable to any institution with some variation depending on the institutional size and number of programs offered.

The literature regarding institutional planning, resource development and institutional effectiveness suggests a positive relationship between the variables. Wilson (1989) found that the higher the level of commitment by the institution to institutional planning the higher the level of institutional effectiveness. He also found that planning personnel's perceptions served as better predictors of institutional effectiveness than perceptions of presidents and resource development personnel.

A major component of planning is involvement. The institution must involve as many people as possible in the process. One study investigated the impact of assessment mandates, particularly South Carolina legislation—Act 629 of 1988, upon the 16 public two-year technical colleges. The study focused on leadership involvement in assessment, support elements developed within institutions to enhance assessment, improvements perceived to have resulted from assessment, changes needed regarding assessment practices, and confidence levels among the leaders that assessment would lead to continuing improvements in college performances. The study examined the institutional effectiveness reports from each of the technical colleges in South Carolina for the years 1991-94 to determine levels of assessment and effectiveness activities within the technical colleges. The study found that the more college leaders were personally involved in assessment activities, the more likely they were to use assessment results for making internal improvements and to believe that assessment would lead to ongoing improvements in overall college performance. In addition, assessment activities and positive use of results for internal improvement improved after the passage of Act 629 in 1989 (McClure, 1996).

Assessment and Evaluation

Program Review

There are many purposes for implementing a program review process. George (1982:50-51) indicated that there were three steps in the assessment of program quality: (1) establish a set of goals for the program; (2) identify the resources, processes, and input variables germane to the established goals; and (3) determine how to measure each of the relevant variables in the program.

"To render judgment on the worth of the program," was noted as the major purpose of evaluation identified by Talmadge (1983:18). A well-designed program review process can improve management decisions by assisting decision-makers in determining whether or not the program is providing relevant educational experiences to its consumers (Talmadge, 1983; Conrad & Wilson, 1985). Educational administrators can utilize a program review in: (1) setting priorities, (2) providing guidelines for the allocation of resources, and (3) facilitating program improvement (Herman, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987:11).

Another purpose associated with program review is program improvement (Barak & Breier, 1990; Conrad & Wilson, 1985). The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), in its Criteria for Accreditation states "the primary concern of accreditation is the improvement of educational quality throughout the region" (1996:1). SACS emphasizes the relationship that exists between the assessment of institutional effectiveness and improvement of programs. Assessment information can be useful in improving academic offerings at institutions that demonstrate institutional effectiveness (Resource Manual on Institutional Effectiveness, 1989). SACS and other accrediting bodies can help stimulate program improvement by requiring that the institution conduct "periodic self-evaluation to identify what it does well, to determine where improvement is needed, and to develop plans to address those improvements" (Ellison & Smith, 1987:1).

One of the commonalties that shows up in any successful program review states that individuals from within the program and individuals accountable for the program must be included in the evaluation process according to Arns and Poland (1980). Todd (1994) surveyed the Southern region of the United States to determine (1) the extent to which the components of institutional effectiveness are implemented, (2) the degree of importance placed on the institutional effectiveness components by institutional members, and (3) any discrepancies between reported implementation and perceived importance of the institutional effectiveness components. The survey included responses from the president, mid-level administrators, and faculty. Todd found that faculty and administrators who have been employed more than six years have a significantly higher agreement with the perceived importance of the institutional effectiveness component of organizational involvement and that administrators have a significantly higher agreement with the perceived importance of the institutional effectiveness component of program evaluation. In addition, respondents from medium sized institutions (1500-3000 FTEs) had a significantly higher agreement with the perceived importance of the institutional effectiveness component of educational goals, program evaluation, and institutional research (Todd, 1994).

Student Outcomes

The review of the literature regarding student outcomes provides some substantive studies. The majority of studies were related to follow-up studies, including: employer satisfaction, current educational status, transfer to four year institution from a community college or another four year institution, degree completion, and personal satisfaction.

Lee (1992) surveyed the graduates and certificate earners from Los Rios Community College annually from 1984 through 1987 and biannually from then on. Following the 1991 survey, the researcher found that: (1) 69 percent of the students who had enrolled to earn transfer credit had transferred to a university by the time of the survey, and almost 68 percent of this group was employed, (2) among those who had enrolled to prepare for a new job, more than 84 percent were employed and 76 percent of those who had provided employment data indicated they were working in a job related to their major course of study.

A similar study conducted by the Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas, in January 1990, had a 66.1 percent response rate on the combination of a mailed questionnaire and a telephone interview. The findings included the following: (1) 87.7 percent of the students had achieved their original educational goal; (2) 79.2 percent were employed in jobs related to their major course of study; (3) 21.6 percent were continuing their course of study in a four-year institution. Following the student survey, the college conducted an employer follow-up survey of 200 employers. Over 90 percent of the 157 responding employers rated the student's job preparation as good or very good, and most gave positive evaluations of other aspects of job performance (Johnson County Community College, 1990).

Not all follow-up studies involved graduation or employer follow-up. A California community college study surveyed 2,701 students who were involved in remedial writing courses during 1986-87. The study survey involved approximately 32 percent of the original participants and was concerned with their reported use of writing skills, employment status, persistence patterns, educational goals, grade point average (GPA's), and number of remedial units taken. The findings included: (1) 88 percent of the respondents reported using their writing skills in courses, while 51 percent used their skills in letter and memo writing; (2) 54 percent of the students reflected a higher that average community college persistence rate; (3) over 75 percent of the students persisting through spring 1987 earned a GPA of 2.0 or better (Dennis-Rounds, 1988).

Similar follow-up studies were completed at Lane Community College, Eugene, Oregon, also at William Rainey Harper College, Palatine, Illinois, and Howard Community College, Columbia, Maryland. All of these studies provided student outcomes; however, none of the studies discuss how the results were used to improve the program. The end result of any effective process is found in the substitutive changes that were made to improve the transfer rate, job placement rate, or employment satisfaction.

Findings

Foundation of Institutional Effectiveness Process

The survey focused on the Texas Senior Institutions and was conducted in the spring of 1997. The overall response rate was 44 percent. The initial section of the survey tried to gain an insight of status of the foundation of institutional effectiveness process with Texas senior institutions. The responder was asked to respond either strongly agreed, agreed, neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed to the statements regarding the current status of their institutional effectiveness process.

When asked if their institution had a clearly written process of institutional effectiveness, 59.4 percent indicated they had. The next question asked if they had a written statement of goals and objectives. The overall response indicated that 68.8 percent had written goals and objectives. When asked if these goals and objectives were derived from the mission/purpose statement, 84.4 percent indicated theirs were derived from the mission/purpose statement.

SACS expects that the goals and objectives would be approved by the appropriate process on the campus, when asked regarding whether their goals and objectives were formally approved, only 65.6 percent indicated that their goals and objectives were approved. Finally, there must be a publicly written statement of commitment and importance from the President and the administration. Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated there was a written commitment by the President and administration on their campus.

In addition, the SACS model requires that the responsibility of planning, implementing, and evaluating the institutional effectiveness process be clearly established. Although 84 percent of the responders indicated the responsibility of planning was clearly established on their campus, only 65 percent indicated that the responsibility of who was responsible for implementing and evaluating the process was clearly defined on their campus.

Assessments and Evaluation

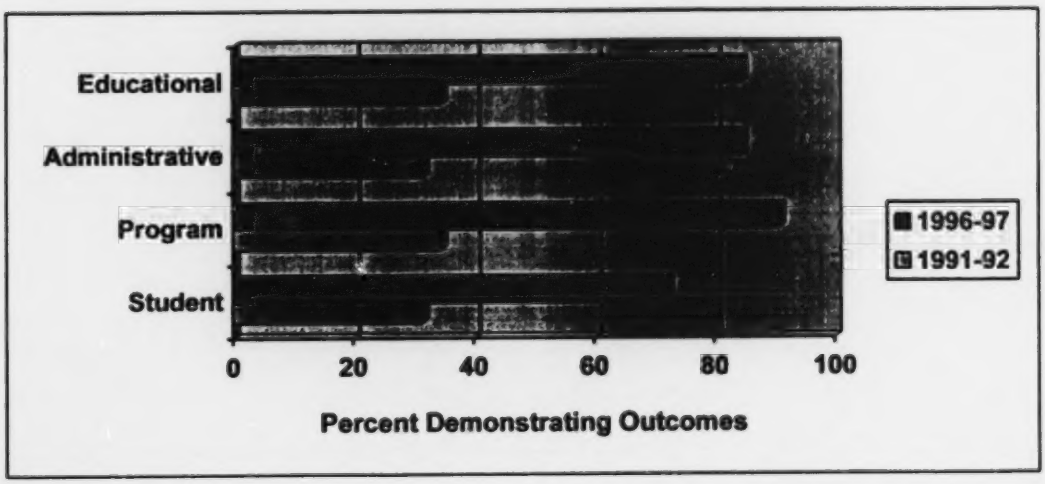
In order to determine to what extent Texas senior institutions had a institutional effectiveness process five years ago and current, the survey asked the responder to identify which institutional effectiveness processes were in place than and which were in place now. The survey focused on student outcomes, program outcomes, and administrative and educational support services outcomes.

The number of institutions indicating that they had a process in place to assess and evaluate student outcomes increased from 31.3 percent to 71.9 percent. There was an even greater increase in the number of institutions reporting that they had a process in place to assess and evaluate program outcomes. A total of 34.4 percent of the respondents indicated they had a process in place in 1991-92 compared to 90.6 percent in 1996-97.

The results were similar for administrative and educational support services outcomes. The number of institutions reporting that they had a process to evaluate administrative and educational support services was 31.3 and 34.4 percent, respectively, in 1991-92 to 84.4 percent for 1996-97.

Figure 2

Assessment and Evaluation Outcomes

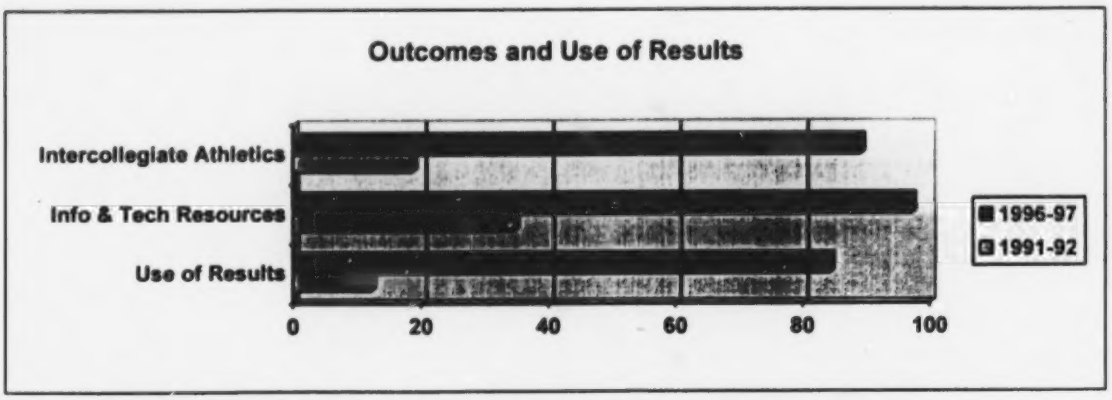


Two very important subsections divisions of the administrative and educational support services area are the information and technology resources and intercollegiate athletics. The difference in the number of institutions reporting that they had a process in 1991-92 compared the number indicating they currently have a process was significant in both areas.

The responses indicated that 96.9 percent of the respondents were assessing and evaluating information and technology resources currently compared to 34.4 percent in 1991-92. Institutions have been pouring substantial amounts of budgeted dollars into technology resources in order to ensure that their students have the same technology resources available there as they would at other institutions. In addition, distance education has required that institutions constantly evaluate their equipment and needs to state current with the market.

Figure 3

Other Outcomes and Use of Results



Similarly, there have been outside forces that have required institutions to evaluate intercollegiate athletics. Title IX requirements have required institutions to regularly evaluate their programs in light of the federal regulations and their changing enrolment characteristics. Over 88 percent of the institutions indicated that they have a process to evaluate intercollegiate athletics currently in place. This statistic compares to 18.5 percent in 1991-92. Five of the responding institutions indicated they did not have intercollegiate athletics.

Assessment and evaluation are important part of the institutional effectiveness process but without demonstrating how these were used to provide continuous improvement, many might argue that the effort had little value. Overall, the majority of the institutions indicated that they had improved their institutional effectiveness process, but many still indicated they had not fully implemented a complete process. However, a significant number had indicated they had

used the results of their assessment and evaluation efforts to implement change. Overall, 84.4 percent of those reporting indicated they had used the results to implement change compared to 12.5 percent in 1991-92.

Figure 4

The Expanded SACS Institutional Effectiveness Model

Institutional Research Office

SACS has strengthened its criteria on the institutional effectiveness function. In 1988, the criteria stated "the institution should assign administrative responsibility for carrying out the institutional research function." Currently, the same statement reads "must assign administrative responsibility."

Institutions have made significant progress in establishing an effective Institutional Research Office. In 1988, the SACS Criteria for Accreditation stated that the institution should assign administrative responsibility for carrying out the institutional research function. The current publication stipulates that the institution must assign administrative responsibilities. A should statement does not mandate that there be a function, whereas a must statement requires that

the function exist. All institutions responding to the survey indicated their institution had an institutional research function as compared to the 45 percent of the participants that indicated their institution did not have an institutional research function in 1991.

Over fifty percent of the respondents reported they were understaffed to carry out all the activities required to support the planning and evaluation processes and another 17 percent were not sure of their overall needs. Although the majority reported they had access to the relevant date and the support of the computer center, 25 percent indicated they did not have access or support.

Overall, the Institutional Research Offices were very effective in collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting the results using the resources available. Ninety-four percent reported they were effective in collecting data and a hundred percent reported they were effective in analyzing the data, while 84 percent reported they were effective in reporting the results.

Conclusions

SACS has strengthened its criteria on the institutional effectiveness function continuously striving to improve the educational quality in the region. The participants were asked to what extent the various processes that form the foundation of the institutional effectiveness process are in effect at their institution and to respond to whether these processes were in place at their institution five years ago. The results of the analysis significantly documented that over 84 percent of the Texas senior institutions have put into place an institutional effectiveness process that has implemented change(s). These changes have occurred in all areas of the university including student outcomes, program outcomes, and administrative and educational support services.

The results of testing the hypotheses indicate that institutions have made significant progress in meeting the SACS concept of institutional effectiveness. A majority of institutions, 59.4 percent, indicated they have implemented a formal institutional effectiveness process, still, 40.6 percent indicated they still did not have a formal process in place. Although the study indicted that many institutions may not have implemented all aspects of the institutional effectiveness process, most have made some progress in complying with the SACS requirements. Institutions have made the most progress in implementing an institutional effectiveness process in three specific areas. Most significant was the increase in the proportion of institutions reporting that they used the results of their assessment to implement change(s). The proportion of institutions increased from 12 percent to 84 percent. A second

area was in the proportion of institutions reporting that they had a formal process to evaluate intercollegiate athletics that increased from 34 percent to 97 percent. A third area was in the proportion of institutions reporting that they had a formal process to evaluate the institution's information technology resources; the proportion of institutions increased from 16 percent to 88 percent.

The majority of respondents report that the assessment and evaluation efforts involving student and program outcomes have effectively helped the institution reach its educational goals and evaluate its program quality, but the current efforts do not effectively evaluate student learning nor the performance of former students. Institutions have made significant progress, 31 percent increasing to 72 percent over the last five years, in implementing a formal process to evaluate student outcomes. Likewise, institutions have made significant progress, 34 percent increasing to 91 percent over the last five years, in implementing a formal process to evaluate program outcomes. Three quarters of the respondents reported that their efforts have been effective in helping the institution meet their educational goals and implementing change(s). Sixty-six percent of the participants reported that their student evaluation efforts effectively evaluated program quality compared to 59 percent of the program assessment efforts. Fifty-six of the participants reported that their student assessment efforts effectively evaluated student learning compared to 34 percent of the program assessment efforts. However, only one third believe their student and program evaluation efforts are effective in evaluating the performance of former students. Institutions have made substantial progress in implementing formal student and program outcomes processes and using the results of their assessment efforts to implement change(s). However, they have not fully utilized the assessment tools and process to effectively evaluate overall program quality, student learning, and the performance of former students.

Institutions utilize a variety of assessment instruments to assess student outcomes and program outcomes. Three assessment tools were identified as being utilized and evaluated by almost all institutions. These include retention rates, completion rates, and student assessment of individual instructor. The three program outcomes assessment tools most frequently reported include annual departmental plans, curriculum/program review, and five-year program review. Overall, these assessments and evaluations have helped the institutions reach educational goals and evaluate program quality, but more effort is required to effectively evaluate student learning and the performance of former students. The majority of student and program assessment tools common to almost all institutions are administered university-wide and on an ongoing basis. A few specific student assessments and program assessments are

administered on an irregular occasional basis. These assessments are usually administered at the division, college, or departmental level.

The number of institutions that reported having approved goals and objectives has doubled over the last five years, and there has been substantial progress in the number of institutions, 31 percent increasing to 78 percent, reporting that their budgeting process is tied to these goals and objectives. However, a review of the individual data suggests that at some institutions some force other than the goals and objectives is still driving the budget. Further research would be required to define all the forces driving the budgetary processes.

The proportion of institutions reporting that they have a process to evaluate the administrative and educational support services areas has more that doubled over the last five years. Sixty-eight percent of the participants agreed that their administrative and educational support services assessment efforts had resulted in change(s) being implemented. However, nineteen percent of the respondents did not identify any assessment tools and another 56 percent identified three or less assessment tools used regularly in their outcomes assessment efforts. Even though the data supports the perception that institutions are improving in the administrative and educational support services area, the researcher believes that very little has been accomplished in this area and a lot is left to be done. If institutions were assessing and evaluating administrative and educational support services as suggested, then the supportive documentation describing the assessment tools and the use of results should substantiate those outcomes.

For an institutional effectiveness process to be viable it must clearly establish who is responsible for planning, implementation, and evaluation. Although there have been significant improvements in these areas, not all institutions have a clearly defined written process and procedure. Eighty-four percent of the participants indicated that the planning function was in place and the process clearly established who is responsible for the planning process. However, only 65 percent of the participants indicated that the process clearly established who was responsible for implementing the process or who was responsible for evaluating the process.

Implications

What is the current status of institutional effectiveness? The results of this study indicated that, although the institutions have had limited and dwindling resources in the nineties, they have made significant advances in meeting the criteria relating to institutional effectiveness

established by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It is obvious that in some areas the institutional effectiveness function has not been completely implemented at many institutions, but there is sufficient support in order to conclude that all institutions have made some progress in improving the quality of education through improved assessment and evaluation in many areas. The most significant outcome was the "use of the results" to effect improvement. Institutions have always done limited assessment particularly in the student and program areas, but the data were seldom evaluated and results were often not implemented.

The Institutional Research Office has become a vital part of the institution's planning process during the past five years. There is, however, some question on staffing inadequacies and that a significant majority report having limited access to the data and support of the computer center. The office is responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting on the outcomes of the student assessments, program assessments, and the administrative and educational support services assessments. If institutions are going to meet the challenges of tomorrow, the Institutional Research Office will need additional resources, including increased professional staffing and support staffing. In addition, institutions must assure unlimited access to relevant data and the support of the computer center.

Universities have made progress in implementing an effective institutional effectiveness process, but over a third still lack a clearly written policy as the basis for the process. Those institutions that lack a statement of goals and objectives and do not have them approved are not in compliance with the SACS Criteria. In addition, those that lack a publicly stated commitment from the President and administration could be in jeopardy of not meeting the Criteria for reaffirmation of accreditation at some future date.

Only when institutions demonstrate that they can and will deliver a quality program that is supported by documentation and results in continuous improvement will the State and other stakeholders be convinced that universities are interested in evaluation and improving their performance.

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